Introduction

Whereas Woolf’s “Modern Fiction” has been an important source for modernist critical methodologies and reading practice, Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, published shortly after the first version of Woolf’s essay ("Modern Novels"), has become foundational in theorising modernism, by providing a general framework and critical apparatus. It has shaped a particular critical context, then, in which we read Modernism. The essay also provides a critical vocabulary for thinking about individual texts in larger contexts, or individual writers within a (or the) canon. From this derives a tricky theory of subjectivity, Eliot’s anti-Romantic notion of poetic impersonality. Most importantly, Eliot’s essay seeks to position change and “the new” firmly back in “tradition”, in an unchanging ideal order remote from the specificities of historical change that we have come to associate, for example, with the date of December 1910.

This chapter begins to examine “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in relation to the critical, theoretical, cultural, political and historical contexts in which it has been positioned, and in which it positions itself. It samples the approaches of critics who have emphasised the rise of New Criticism, and the trajectory of Eliot’s body of critical work, as the most important contexts to understand his theses, and of those who prefer to look at historical and cultural contexts, such as the Great War, the Russian Revolution, or the rise of
fascism. The essay’s place in a tradition of formalist, modernist and avant-garde criticism is discussed with special reference to the influential theories of Clement Greenberg, emerging in the 1940s. The essay is also explored for its cultural resonance of memorialising in the era of national mourning after the Great War. There follows a sampling of differing critical approaches to Eliot’s “ideal order”, and a discussion of his theory of impersonality. It is at this crucial point in the argument that Eliot’s essay comes to a stop for its first readers, who had to wait for the next issue of The Egoist to read on. This chapter concludes by examining what follows on, in the pages of this journal, after the first instalment of Eliot’s essay: the “Hades” episode from James Joyce’s Ulysses, which itself provides insight into modernist discourses of hell, elegy, mourning and tradition. So the chapter ends, then, by introducing the material, published context in which Eliot’s essay first appeared, a context that will provide further food for thought in Chapter 4.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)

Two years after the publication of Eliot’s first, ground-breaking volume of poetry, Prufrock and Other Observations (1917), and three years in advance of The Waste Land (1922), this seminal modernist essay was first published, in two parts, in the journal on which Eliot was assistant editor, The Egoist of September and December 1919 (five months after Woolf’s “Modern Novels” appeared in the TLS). Republished several times in the poet’s lifetime, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” has been avidly cited and anthologised by Modernist criticism ever since. More than this, it has been the pedagogical foundation for institutionalising literary canons. The essay’s two main propositions concern, first, the mutually adjusting relations between the individual poet or artist and an “ideal order” – or canon – of art (54); and secondly, the status and role of the poet’s emotions and “personality” in the production of poetry. It culminates in the identification of “significant emotion” (73), which is an aesthetic emotion paradoxically arising from poetic “impersonality”: “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (55). This is a dynamic process of repeated cycles of artistic “surrender” to